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Music at the Seams of Cultures: An Intermedial Reading of

Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

Abstract

Intermediality refers to cross-relationships among different media of art/communication such as literature, music, visual arts and sometimes, the digital media. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) by Salman Rushdie (1947-) is a novel that uses rock music as a medium to weave the story of the protagonists, Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama. This paper discusses the role of music as a triumphant catalyst in blending cultural differences; crossing geographical, racial, and mythological frontiers of East and West.

Keywords – East/West, intermediality, music, Ormus, Vina.

Introduction

Intermediality is an area that comes under Interart studies- a subdiscipline of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. Medium is primarily a material/tool for communication/ expression. The term intermediality signifies any kind of inter-relationship among different media of art/communication such as literature, music, visual arts and sometimes modern digital media too. It is “a generic term for all those phenomena that...in some way take place *between* media... Intermedial references are thus to be understood as meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product’s overall signification” (Rajewsky 46). For instance, musicalization of literature, *ekphrasis*, filmic techniques in narration etc.

The contemporary British- Indian author Salman Rushdie’s novels frequently employ intermedial narration. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is one among them. Set in the backdrop of the development of rock music during the 1930s-1990s, this novel portrays the story of Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama, narrated by their confidant Umeed “Rai” Merchant. Music is the driving force of their love, life and death.

Aptly described by Toni Morrison as a “world novel,” (qtd. in Tomoiagd 143) *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* travels across continents traversing the frontiers of East and West. Multiculturalism is a conspicuous aspect of the novel. The novel (chronologically) begins in 1937 British-India and ends in the 1990s in the developing period of globalization and gradual Americanization. The paper studies elements of multiculturalism mediated through music at three levels: geographical, racial and mythological; with respect to Vina and Ormus.

Vina had music in her blood. Her mother had an inclination to singing. Vina lost her family when she was ten and her foster father John Poe considered popular music a segregated one calling it “the devil’s boogie.” Seeking solitude, she frequented the woods to

voice her out. She “let everything go, and sang. Shake, rattle and roll! ... Music! It was all she wanted in life.” (Rushdie 107).

Ormus was a child with precocious musical talent: “the chord progressions of his finger movements...the syncopated drumming of his tiny feet against his crib and the perfect –pitch gurgles that went up and down the musical scale, *saregama padhanisa, sanidhapa magaresa*” were extraordinary (Rushdie 46). On growing up, he walked, swayed and twitched as if he himself is a song. But, Ormus’ father too hated music and musicians. Everything related to music was taboo in the house. According to him, “Music was a virus, an infection, and music-lovers were comparable to...sexual immoralists.” (Rushdie 38). His elder brother Cyrus Cama (who later became a psychopathic killer) hated him immensely out of jealousy that one day, while little Ormus was singing in his sleep, he clutched a pillow over him to kill him. Their ayah woke up and saved the child but the trauma stopped the song inside him. He didn’t sing for the next fourteen years until Vina came to his life as his muse.

It was in 1956 and the modern communication technology was in its infancy in the country. There was no television in the households and Western popular music was not played in the All India Radio broadcasts. Rock music was something unknown to Ormus till he was in his teens. He was introduced to it at the Rhythm Centre store in Fort, Mumbai (then Bombay), where he met Vina for the first time. She taught him to play guitar and inspired him to write the verses that he had in his mind. Later, with their band VTO, they became world-renowned rock music stars.

Geography is a defining factor of culture. One’s place of belonging is a significant aspect that defines her/his cultural identities. There is always a sense of “somewhere better” in both of them: “For Ormus Cama , ‘better’ meant abroad...For Vina Apsara, the right place was always the one she wasn’t in.” (Rushdie 163)

To Vina, homeland is a labyrinth. Born in a dysfunctional family in America, she has always been on the move, either by choice or by force. Due to deplorable circumstances, she has been swung from one place to another in her childhood (from Virginia to Chikaboom and then to India). The twelve-year-old Vina is sent by her father to Bombay to live with her distant relatives-the Doodhwallas. On her arrival, everything Indian becomes detestable to her. But gradually she begins to like its ways, partly because of the company of Ormus and partly because of her desire to explore the new and the unknown. She gets enchanted by the music of India-- northern sitar ragas, southern Carnatic melodies, ghazals etc. She would compare herself to Columbus saying that he looked for India and found America but she could find more Indians. Though she couldn't learn to write Indian languages, she manages to speak what they call 'Hug-Me' (Hindi-Urdu-Gujarati-Marathi-English) and is fond of Bollywood movies. Ormus' love could not hold her back. She flees to England, takes some apprenticeships in London, and then moves to New York to become a popular singer.

When she happens to get tidings of an earthquake in Mumbai, she flies back to India in search of Ormus. By that time, Ormus has moved to England. Vina lives in the city for a while learning oriental medicines, vegetarian diet, yoga and ayurveda (which later help Ormus to recover from his comatose). Reunited in England, they together migrate to America and start a rock music band called VTO which bring them fame and success.

Towards the end, their relationship grows troublesome and Vina decides to go solo. (Till then Vina used to sing only the verses written by Ormus). She also travels as a lecture tourist after she becomes an honorary professor at a liberal-arts- college. Her journey comes to a temporal end in the 1989 earthquake that has shaken Mexico where she has been on a performance tour.

At each stage of departure, her desire to sing keeps her on track. When she is a child, at a starlit night, her mother asks her what she wants to become in the future. She points at a shooting star that has been swiftly shifting directions. When she gets abused in a crowd or at school, she would sing the rage out alone. She finds a place in the forest where she has solitude. One such day, on her return, she finds her family destroyed, set ablaze by her mother. She exasperates: "I am alive because my mother wanted me to sing." (Rushdie 109).

In India, she finds a companion in Ormus. What binds them together is the music inside them that sings to each other. Yet, she could not stand by him because she wants to go away and be herself. Thus, she flies to England and then back to America. She sings: "*The blues is just another name for not having any place.*" (Rushdie 336)

America is a dreamland for emigrants, as it has been for Ormus too. He says: "I want to be in America, America where everyone's like me, because everyone comes from somewhere else." (Rushdie 252). But his immediate destination is England as he is moving with his family. By the time he reaches England, it is the golden age of British rock n roll. "The music... makes him feel at home." (Rushdie 367) He starts a rock music band called Rhythm Centre and his memories of Vina becomes the fuel of his verses.

Ormus is hit by a terrible accident that leaves him in comatose for three years (after which Vina comes to his aid). "Music will save us," she comforts him (Rushdie 351). They move to America and later get married. Together, they run the band VTO; Ormus being the rock and Vina the roll.

Rushdie states: "Among the great struggles of man-good/evil, reason/unreason, etc. - there is also this mighty conflict between the fantasy of Home and the fantasy of Away, the dream of roots and the mirage of the journey. And if you are Ormus Cama, if you are Vina

Apsara, whose songs could cross all frontiers, even the frontiers of people's hearts" (Rushdie 55).

Race/ethnicity is considered an important mark of culture. But Ormus and Vina overcome the frontiers of skin and origin through their expeditions in music. (The VTO has a song titled 'At the frontier of skin')

Vina is born Nissa Shetty to a Greek-American mother and an Indian father during World War II. After her father abandons them and her mother stoops to drinking, a widower called John Poe becomes her foster father. Thus Nissa Shetty becomes Nissy Poe. Because of her mixed race origin, she has a dark brown skin that discriminates her among her schoolmates. They call her names. She has been a wild and ferocious child since the kindergarten and has often been complained of biting fellow-students and teachers. Poe once goes to explain to the school authorities that she is not a black but an Indian so she should be allowed to get into the school bus. (Those times, black students were not allowed to ride on the bus along with the white students). She is neither white nor black. Belonging to neither and detested by both, she falls into a no-man's-land. After a tragic incident that leaves her the sole survivor of the family, her father returns and sends her to her distant relatives, the Egiptuses of Chickaboom where she becomes Diana Egiptus. Rejected and ill-treated by Mrs. Egiptus, she finally arrives in India and becomes Vina Apsara- a name that she chooses and lasts forever.

As she changes names, she buries her tragic past and gets reborn to new identities. Eventually, she becomes the first brown woman supporting the first black women to play and perform popular music, which was considered substandard in the beginning. She even turns to social activism and becomes the youth icon of the time, freeing herself of the stigma of racial subordination.

During the nascent period of globalization, emigration to the West has not been an uncommon phenomenon in the post-independence India. When the son of an elite Parsi Anglophile, Ormus leaves for England and then to America, he has just been joining the growing Indian diaspora in the West. Except that Ormus encounters some emigration issues regarding citizenship in America (which has been settled later), his terrains are open unhindered by racial segregation. The colonial and post-colonial experience has already prepared the routes of East-West transactions. As English acted as a global language, his only trouble is an occasional nostalgia he retains for the city of Bombay.

Popular music genres (as opposed to the traditional classical music) has been considered lowbrow both in the West and in the East in the early-twentieth century. (Like Ormus's and Vina's fathers) many maintained rock music (and other forms of pop arts) as devilish, immoral and part of low culture. Ormus and Vina, powered by their urge to sing, have reformed the segregated music.

Juxtaposition of East/West mythologies is an integral part of the novel. Rushdie uses frequent references to the Indian myth of Kama/Rati and the Greek myth of Orpheus/Eurydice while unraveling the love, lives and deaths of Ormus and Vina.

In Hindu mythology, Kama and his consort Rati are the gods of love and desire. After the death of Sati, Lord Shiva turns an ascetic. In order to redeem the world from Tarakasura, Kama invokes desire in Shiva to fall in love with Parvati. Agitated, Shiva opens his third eye and burns Kama. According to the *Puranas*, Rati pleads to Parvati and takes penance so that she is assured Kama to be reborn as Pradyumna.

Orpheus is considered an archetypal figure of musical excellence in Western mythology. According to the classical version of Virgil, Orpheus is the son of Apollo and

Calliope who has been gifted with extraordinary musical talents with which he could enchant all the living and non-living things in the world. Orpheus falls in love with Eurydice and marries her. On her unexpected death, the grief-stricken Orpheus follows her to the Underworld and melts the hearts of the gods of the Hades with his music. Therefore, they let her go with him on condition that he should not look back, disobeying which Orpheus loses her forever. He tries to descend to her again but is ultimately killed by supernatural powers.

When Ormus is in comatose, struck by a fatal accident, it is Vina who brings him back to normal life, playing the role of Rati in Hindu mythology. Orpheus tries to bring his beloved back to life, in vain. Similarly, Ormus, after Vina's death, unable to come to terms with reality, tries to find solace in Vina-look-alike singers, but is murdered mysteriously. Ultimately, both embrace death but their songs remain alive.

Conclusion

Fiction, written in the medium of prose, cannot, technically *sound* musical. However, thematically, through the musical journeys of the characters, the readers could experience such resonances in their mind's ear. In his pioneering work in the interdisciplinary field of literature and music studies (*Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*), Calvin S. Brown discusses the idea of 'symphonic novel' formulated and practiced by Paul-Emile Cadilhac which can be applied to this novel too. According to Cadilhac, symphonic novels are those works of prose fiction that creates a musical atmosphere primarily in terms of themes. Besides, the literary equivalents of harmony and orchestration can be fictionally recreated in novels through the portrayals of characters, dialogues, settings, rhetorical devices, narrative methods etc that involves musical overtones and lyrical quality. (qtd. in Brown 174).

The Ground Beneath Her Feet presents the trope of music as an embodiment of cultural hybridity illustrated through the lives of the protagonists. When Rushdie writes, “[a]ll frontiers would crumble before the sorcery of the tune...beyond family and clan and nation and race, flying untouchably over the minefields of taboo....,” he thus uses Music, as a universal medium that permeates and transcends membranes of multiple cultures (Rushdie 55).

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